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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001623

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FOR NEA/ARP AND DRL

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TAGS: [PHUM KIRF KU](#)

SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: BUREAUCRACY AND RELIGION COLLIDE
IN MUNICIPAL COUNCIL'S REBUFFING OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

REF: A. KUWAIT 1135

[1](#)B. KUWAIT 768

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment: A committee of Kuwait's Municipal Council has engineered the refusal of a request from the National Evangelical Church (NEC) for a school license. (Note: The NEC serves as an umbrella organization for a loose grouping of Protestant groups. The legal sponsor of NEC is a Kuwaiti Christian pastor, but the NEC executive committee is made up of clergymen representing several different nationalities. End Note.) The Municipal Council technical committee chairman distorted the Church's purposes to the public and before the committee, focusing on religious and cultural objections, and thereby probably scuttling what otherwise should have been a non-controversial license application. The episode highlights the stranglehold that Islamists have over many parts of the Kuwaiti bureaucracy. End summary and comment.

Background: The School and Why It Requested a License

[1](#)2. (U) The Lighthouse Academy school has operated without an official Ministry of Education license for 30 years. In Kuwait, a school license is the equivalent of a school being accredited in the U.S. Currently the school offers education through third grade. Approximately two years ago, the school decided it wanted to expand its offerings to a full elementary school education. Because the school is unaccredited, however, Lighthouse pupils face difficulties transferring their credits to other schools in Kuwait and elsewhere. The older the students who want to transfer to other schools, the more difficult it will be to do so without official accreditation. Obtaining a license involves running a gauntlet of GOK agencies, including the Municipal Council which oversees zoning issues.

Technical Committee Rejects School License

[1](#)3. (U) In an April 5 meeting, the Technical Committee of the Municipal Council recommended refusing the Evangelical Church of Kuwait's request to license its school, the Lighthouse Academy. The Committee did not give an official reason for the refusal. However, the committee's negative action was foreshadowed in an article published in the Al-Rai Al-Aam daily newspaper the morning of the meeting. Committee Chairman and Municipal Council Member Majid Musa Al-Mutairi told the paper that he opposed the school's request. The article referred to "the Evangelical Church's request to use the American Hospital and convert it into a primary school and a preschool." (Note: The American Hospital is a historic landmark in Kuwait and no one would accept its

conversion into a school. End note.) NEC, however, had only requested a license for its existing school on the NEC compound which is next to -- and in no way encroaching upon -- the American Hospital. The article's source for this error was likely Al-Mutairi. The truth about the school's location is not difficult to obtain, which suggests he willfully distorted the truth.

15. (SBU) The action of the Municipal Council committee deals a serious setback to the school which has been engaged in a two-year bureaucratic struggle to obtain a license. It had already won approval from the fire and health departments, and most importantly, from the National Council on Cultural Heritage, which is responsible for historic preservation. Municipal Council approval was the next step in a process that ultimately leads to approval by the Ministry of Education.

16. (SBU) In the press article, Al-Mutairi said the school's request contradicted the Islamic religion. He expressed his "amazement" that the executive body of the Municipal Council had agreed to the Church's request and his "shock" that the National Council on Cultural Heritage had not objected to the "handing over of the hospital to the Evangelical Church." Other anonymous sources from the Municipal Council rejected the "violation of the faith of the Islamic State" and claimed that the request contained the goal of spreading Christianity. They also expressed surprise that the Cultural Heritage Committee had assented to giving away one of Kuwait's historic buildings. The Church asked the newspaper to print its response to the erroneous charges. The paper did not publish the response, even though Kuwait's new Press and Publications law mandates that it do so (ref B, par. 11).

Municipal Council's Questionable Procedures

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17. (C) LES PolAssistant spoke with Fawzia Al-Bahr, a Municipal Council member, about the Technical Committee action. Al-Bahr said that Al-Mutairi had told the Committee that the school would take over the American Hospital, so they rejected it. When PolAssistant said the Church was not planning to do that, Al-Bahr said they should get a letter from the National Council on Cultural Heritage to that effect. Al-Bahr then became slightly flustered and said that NEC should find some other way to resubmit its request. Al-Bahr acknowledged that she had not seen a file on the case, and had simply listened to Al-Mutairi's presentation of the issue.

18. (C) PolOff contacted two Municipal Council members on April 10. Fadhel Safar Ali, a Shi'a Council Member with Islamist leanings, claimed not to know that there was any religious element to the case, despite the fact that it was in the newspapers before and after the Committee session. He said that every member gets a file on each case three days before the Technical Committee session, but was not aware that the Cultural Heritage Committee had approved the application. Ali noted that there were objections to using the hospital compound for a school and that it was inappropriate to have a school in a non-residential area. Khalifa Al-Khorafi, a liberal Council member, told PolOff that he was aware that it was a Church request, but that he was not aware that a school currently was located on the compound. He said it was not an appropriate area for a school, but went on to say that he would welcome the Church's coming to the Council's next session and correcting any "misunderstandings." NEC is weighing possible next steps.

The Municipal Council: Freedom Agenda Chokepoint

19. (C) Comment: The Municipal Council is a key player in many freedom agenda issues since it approves all allocations

of government land. This includes land for NGOs and religious institutions. It is supposed to play a technical role, but its members frequently make political statements, thereby calling into question its neutrality. The transcript of the discussion over allotting land for a new church for the Greek Catholics (Melkites) (ref A) was published in the newspaper and contained Council members (including Al-Mutairi) explicitly denying the permissibility of churches on the Arabian peninsula (there is a saying of the Prophet Muhammad to this effect). In the present case, Council Members gave both ideological explanations (it is against Islam, it will be used for proselytization) and technical reasons (it would take over a historic site). Lack of transparency on the part of the Council and the prevalence of a narrow-minded Islamist worldview combine to make the Municipal Council as currently constituted an obstacle on the path to a more tolerant, progressive society. End comment.

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